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A bridge too far

With Franklin span closed, need for N.J. repair funding is depicted

Suzanne Russell, @SRussellMyCJ

EDISON – The need to find long-term funding for transportation projects throughout the state hit home in Franklin Township (Somerset County) last week when state Department of Transportation Commissioner Jamie Fox closed the Amwell Road Bridge over the Delaware and Raritan Canal in the East Millstone section of Franklin.

Philip K. Beachem, New Jersey Alliance for Action president and a former Franklin Township mayor, said he received a call from a resident inquiring about the closure of the structurally deficient bridge between the Village of East Millstone and the Borough of Millstone.

Beachem, speaking Thursday during a news conference here about the current condition and funding of the state's transportation system, said the resident pointed out the Millstone Valley First Aid Squad and Fire Company are both located in East Millstone but serve both sides of the river and with the bridge closed, until the end of February for emergency repairs, access to those emergency services now is compromised.

"This is the kind of information people have to understand. We're not just talking about repairing the bridge, which we are, we're talking about giving a repair that gives emergency access in this particular case to a borough that is probably just realizing that in order to get first aid rig access and fire rig access it may have to get a rig from Route 206 in Hillsborough which has its own traffic issues," Beachem said. "It's just an example of how the average person doesn't understand and connect this until it hits them in the face."

The end of Transportation Trust Fund revenue

With the state Transportation Trust Fund set to expire, Commissioner Fox and others are calling on the state to find a long-term revenue solution to replenish the trust fund and help pay for the state's transportation infrastructure improvements.

"We have a Transportation Trust Fund that is broke and it's broke July 1," Fox said during the news conference. "This is not a maybe broke on July 1, it is broke on July 1. The days of kicking the can down the field are over. We've run out of playing field."



Department of Transportation Commissioner Jamie Fox(Photo: -File)

Fox said the state needs to address the issue because revenue needs to be raised to build and fix bridges, invest in mass transit, and fix potholes. Fox said he has notified mayors that after July 1 they should not anticipate the money the DOT has provided on an annual basis for

transportation work, with about \$80 million given counties to fix potholes and paves roads. He said federal money still is there along with some local aid.

"If the money is not there then the inevitable happens," said Fox, adding the transportation infrastructure system is like a human body, if you don't pay attention to it, it gets sick and falls apart and then when it gets very sick it costs twice as much to repair.

He said accepting mediocrity in our transportation infrastructure system is not OK.

"We sit an hour and half outside the Lincoln or Holland tunnels and think that's OK. We sit on a mass transit train on NJ Transit that's 45 years old and thinks that's OK. We go up and down our local roads and spend \$2,000 a year repairing our cars as a result of potholes and think that's OK. I don't think we should accept that," he said.

He noted the widening project on the southern portion of New Jersey Turnpike is an example of the type of work that

can be done when there is revenue available. "We can fix Route 1, we can fix Route 9, we can fix Route 4, we can upgrade our mass transit system. We can do that if we have a revenue stream to pay for it," Fox said.

He said millennials like to live in places where they can use mass transit to get to New York, Philadelphia and Rutgers.

"That's how these towns, whether it's a Rahway, Elizabeth or Trenton can come back, because they have a mass transit system," said Fox adding any resolution to the Transportation Trust Fund issue should include an investment in the state's mass transit system.



The Amwell Road bridge over the Delaware and Raritan Canal was closed last week for emergency repairs. Repairs are expected to take through the end of February.(Photo: Kathy Johnson/Staff Photographer)

A call for action

Fox said appointed and elected leaders as well as stakeholders need to step up and have their voices heard about the need for a healthy funded transportation system.

Thursday there was a chorus of those voices.

Assembly Speaker Vincent Prieto, D-32nd District said the closing of the Route 3 East Bridge over the Hackensack River, used by about 75,000 drivers each day traveling to the Lincoln Tunnel, is further evidence of the need to find a revenue solution to replenish the Transportation Trust Fund. The bridge was recently closed by the DOT after cracks were found in the steel support structure causing severe traffic congestion.

"The Route 3 Bridge is not the first piece of our crumbling infrastructure to fail, and if our state doesn't do something about our transportation funding crisis soon, then it certainly won't be the last," said Prieto, who has advocated for more transportation revenue. "The costs of lost productivity and aggravation for drivers over the next few weeks while emergency repairs are being conducted is the price our state is paying for its inability to solve this problem."

Move New Jersey Forward, a group of transportation, business, labor, planning and environmental leaders working toward a sustainable transportation system in the state, sent out a news release stating the state must generate and constitutionally dedicate new revenues to the Transportation Trust Fund at a level high enough to meet the state's needs now and in the future.

And Tracy Noble, AAA Mid-Atlantic public and government affairs manager, sent out a letter stating funding transportation is about safety on roads and bridges.



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Department of Transportation Commissioner Jamie Fox(Photo: -File)

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Rutgers grad heads outreach for rail tunnel building plan

One of the best places to find an unpaid job to make a difference is at Rutgers University. A Rutgers graduate is heading to the state capital to help with a project that will help build a rail tunnel through the state.

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funding program the state would ensure it would not lose federal transportation funds to other states, and it would allow the DOT to properly plan for transportation projects. At the time it was created, the Transportation Trust Fund was a national model, he said.



A car driver uses a detour to bypass a closed bridge. The Amwell Road bridge over the Delaware and Raritan Canal was closed last week for emergency repairs. Repairs are expected to take through the end of February. (Photo: Kathy Johnson/Staff Photographer)

But Fox explained the Transportation Trust Fund has run out of money to borrow and now just debt is being paid off. He said investments in expensive projects like bridge repairs and replacements have been put off because there is no revenue stream to support the work.

Fox said he has closed bridges because they are unsafe.

"Bridges are getting older and we have people looking to make sure they are safe. The last thing we want to have happen is a car or truck go over a bridge and it collapse," Fox said.

Fox, a Democrat working for a Republican governor, feels there is a bipartisan resolution to the Transportation Trust Fund issue but the tough part will be to get enough votes.

"Our economy cannot survive unless we do this," Fox said who believes there will be a package of reforms that contain costs and are innovative as far as design build and revenue.

"I'm not ruling anything in or anything out, everything is on the table," said Fox when asked about taxing diesel gas users who fill up in New Jersey, many from out of state.

"About 40 to 45 percent of people who fill up at a gas station are from out of state, which is an interesting statistic."

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